



Cancer Personals

Five years ago I decided to try my luck at placing a personal ad in a local entertainment magazine. Headings for placing ads included *Women Seeking Men*, *Men Seeking Women*, *Men Seeking Men*, *Women Seeking Women*, and the very optimistic *I Saw You* for those seeking romance with someone talked to once at a coffee shop, bumped into at the airport, or smiled at while crossing a busy intersection. Match.com, EHarmony.com, and all dating hookups promise that my home city, like most cities around the world, is filled with people like myself, ready to search for love in all the right places.

Because I was newly single and 54 at the time, I figured I was about 30 years past the prime pool of love seekers. I calculated what I thought my odds were for meeting a compatible mate. Taking the metropolitan area population and dividing it to find the probable number of age-appropriate unmarried males gave me a base number. Subtracting priests, gays, smokers, criminals, slackers, and men who hadn't read a book since kindergarten significantly reduced the odds. When I deducted the likely number of males who hadn't said "Thank you" or "I'm sorry" in the last decade, I arrived at the final sum of two available men. As I had been thinking there was no one for me to meet and fall in love with, I felt encouraged enough to give love seeking a try.

The local magazine didn't charge money to place personal ads, but it cost money to respond to ads. So I placed my free ads and waited. In all, I submitted six 35-word ads (more words cost money as well) with frugally

crafted variations of “academic, traveler, Birkenstock wearer” seeks “mature done something with life politically progressive male.” And each ad I submitted netted a surprisingly large number of responses. The largest number of responses came from male college professors. Other men who responded included artists, businessmen, lawyers, a psychologist, a retired physicist, a landscape designer, a cardiologist, and one used Volvo salesman.

My attitude from the beginning of this venture was that the biggest mistake anyone could make in placing personal ads was to take them too personally. I set up a screening process in order to minimize squandering my psychic energy on false hopes. If men responded to my phone message questionnaire saying the book they’d recommend was “can’t think of one,” I drew a line through their name and phone number. Men making references to women as ladies or girls or answering my questions about politics certain that Bush “is on the right track” were no goes. By heeding verbal red flags, respondents themselves flashed this way and that way, it was relatively easy to whittle down the number of men I’d give up an hour of reading or working in the garden to go meet in person.

I considered these face-to-face meetings to be viewings, not dates. My careful telephone screening worked. The 20 or so men I met were, for the most part, as they had presented themselves on the telephone. And, as luck would have it, in the end my math had been right: there were only two men with whom there was enough mutual interest to try having a real date. The first man was a university political science professor and a cheapskate like me. His money-saving strategy was to allow himself one personal ad response a month. I had been his January catch, but in February he found an even better deal somewhere else. The other man, unbeknownst to me, decided on our first dinner at a quiet Thai restaurant that he had found the woman he was waiting for. When several dates later he discovered our values about married life were anything but a match, the tasty dinners were over.

But my personals odds five years ago were absolutely resplendent compared to my odds today. Having a diagnosis of terminal cancer makes my chances of meeting anyone beyond dismal. With all the deductions

shifted to my side of the love equation, I might as well be searching for a button lost by Mary, Queen of Scots. That I am still alive, healthy, and single probably won't get me much leverage in the land of lover wannabes. After all, it's hard to imagine the phone ringing off the hook in response to:

LAST CHANCE

Upright Birkenstock wearing former academic woman with terminal lung cancer seeks politically progressive non-smoker with a keen sense of today's significance, that none of us knows what tomorrow brings. Long-term commitment not available.

My second chance at a primary relationship different from the one I was in for 28 years isn't going to happen. But it turns out that having cancer doesn't change anyone's past or alter the most fundamental desires either. I remember sitting on my cabin front porch several years ago, listening to the local handyman's heartbreaking tale of love. He'd just gotten married for the third time at age 76, only to find several months later a note waiting for him inside an emptied out trailer house. When I asked him why he decided to marry Gloria of all the women he'd danced the winters away with in Phoenix, he said, "She was the only one who could dance with my mistakes." At the time I felt awestruck by the stamina of the human heart. I felt proud of this weatherworn man on my porch, that he had risked so much for yet one more chance at romance. And I remember also being overcome with despair, reminded again that multiple failed marriages, heartaches, and aging don't put a dent in the human hunger to love and be loved.

Now that cancer has put my odds of finding a mate at minus zero, I am amazed to catch myself still fantasizing about love, sex, romance, and two slung-back chairs side by side waiting for the sun to set in Barcelona. I am more saddened than angry that my second chance for an intimate relationship with a man is not to be. Male friends for years have told me I intimidate men, including themselves, at times. I think I just didn't learn early on how to dance well with a partner. Perhaps too often I still stop to

analyze the dance patterns rather than give myself over to the rhythms.

By current calculations, I will have spent over half my life sleeping solo. Like a lone dinghy moored to the shore, I've floated and rocked through years of nighttime serenity, desire, frustration, and resolve. But because my waking hours are always filled with the comradeship of neighboring vessels large and small, I have plenty of reassurance that none of us ever sleeps in total isolation. Every night the shoreline I'm moored to is filled with millions of others who, like me, rock unattended in the dark. Our sleeping alone hours might appear to add up to a quell the size of eternity. But, we all know that in the end, death holds the trump card for aloneness.

Last night as I was drifting off to sleep, I thought about a few past lovers and remembered just how simple it had been sometimes and then again how complicated sharing bed covers could be. I sensed my own body stretched out in the night air and knew that I have not yet ceased to be "...like a jackfruit on the tree...rich juice" capable of staining a lover's hands (Ho Xuan Huong). Most nights sleeping alone is satisfying and even luxurious, but since my diagnosis of stage IV lung cancer, I occasionally catch sight of my bed growing even emptier. While warming the sheets alone, I flash back to those earlier personal ads and sometimes wish my odds had been just a little bit better.